

CHAPTER 43

May 26, 2011

"The big day's tomorrow, huh?"

Justin groaned across the table from Chie at Aiya's. Given the direction their last conversation had gone here, Justin felt slightly... unfulfilled. Chie and him had usually come here as a retreat of sorts. They could sit down, relax, eat some ramen, or steak in Chie's case, and just talk. Last time, though, it was more of a therapy session than anything. It was nice to get a lot of that stuff on the table, but it just didn't seem right for this to all go down at their favorite restaurant, their little retreat from all that was shitty in the world. Justin wanted to correct that, so here they were again, chewing on noodles while making awkward chit-chat about whatever popped into their heads.

"I seriously cannot believe Daisuke is Yosuke's Vice President now..."

The rumor Chie had told him about turned out to be true. Daisuke had entered as a joke, yes, but when he heard that Kou would be in Yosuke's party as well... Well, all his friends were doing it, so why the hell not. Justin rubbed his eyes using the tips of both hands. He was seriously fucked now. According to the polls, Yosuke was coming dangerously close to overtaking Justin, who had fallen to second place after a while. The thing about his speech was that it was great for riling up the crowd then; but when you look at it in retrospect, Justin looked more like a psychopath than anything. And of all the people that could be winning, it had to be Hisako. *Smug little prick. I wish everyone could see his true colors. Then we'd see how many people would vote for him.*

"Hey, don't worry so much. We have to announce our running parties tomorrow, right?"

"Yeah?"

"Well, once you announce Yukiko's going to be your treasurer, I'm sure tons of people will hop on board."

Justin shrugged. That was true; the only reason people knew Daisuke had joined Yosuke's cabinet was because he had dropped out. Had it been anyone else, no one would even know who was in Yosuke's cabinet. It probably only looks like a strong line-up because they have nothing to compare it to. What concerned him, however, was his choice of Vice President and Secretary. He stood by the notion that Chie would be perfect for the job, but he wasn't sure people would agree. Plus, Yosuke could easily sabotage her position by acknowledging the two were in a relationship. And Kanji... Well Kanji didn't exactly have a good reputation. If Justin wanted to use

Kanji's name to his advantage, he was really going to have to work the crowd up for him. He sighed slightly.

"Either that or I'm going to need to drag Yosuke's name through the dirt."

"Haven't you been doing that all week?"

"I don't think drawing moustaches on all his posters really counts."

The two paused for a moment, deep in thought. It was true that Yukiko would attract a lot of votes, but he might need a little more than that. After a good few minutes of sitting in silence Justin puffed out some hot air.

"I've got nothin'"

"Me neither."

"So I guess the plan is for me to go batshit insane on the stage again."

"It worked last time."

Justin and Chie both hung their heads in shame in complete synchronization. How was it that they couldn't think of a single thing to top Yosuke? Justin shook his head. It was clear the problem was just that the two had a brain-block. Forcing themselves to come up with ideas wasn't going to help. They just needed to back off for a bit, and let the ideas come to them.

"Hey Chie? Can I ask you something?"

" Sure."

"Why do you think you'd make a bad Vice President?"

"Huh? W-Well, you know me... I'm not exactly the brightest bulb on the tree..." Chie's face turned beat red with humiliation as the words left her mouth. She knew she wasn't exactly smart, but it was still embarrassing to admit out loud, even worse to have to explain it.

"So what you're saying is you're the perfect politician?" Justin smirked. Chie chuckled slightly. She walked right into that one.

"Alright, let me ask you a question then."

"Shoot."

"How come you want me to be Vice President? I mean, is it just because--"

"No."

"I mean, it's okay if it is, it's just--"

“Chie...”

“Wouldn’t you rather pick someone who—”

“Chie!”

“Oh... Sorry.” Chie blushed slightly. She had been so caught in thought, that she couldn’t stop herself from pondering aloud, even after Justin had already answer her question. He shook his head slightly, a slight grin on his face.

“I picked you because you’ve got that ‘get things done’ attitude. Besides, I know that once you have your mind set on something, you won’t give up until you’ve accomplished what you set out to do.”

Chie blushed at Justin’s flattery. “You really think so?”

“I wouldn’t have said it if I didn’t.”

Chie only seemed to blush harder at the confirmation, which in turn only made Justin blush. It was this strange chain-reaction the two of them had. Whenever one started to blush for a prolonged period of time, the other one forcibly had to jump in. Justin chuckled slightly, pointing his head down to try and hide his red cheeks. Not like he was fooling Chie, but he instinctively did it anyway. Chie giggled at Justin’s sudden shy streak. He hated that she was laughing at him getting embarrassed, but there was nothing he loved more than the sound of her laughter. An interesting paradox to be sure.

It was quiet for a while between the two, each lightly blushing at the other. No words needed to be exchanged; it was enough that they had both been there, and they were both happy. It took a while before the strange blush inducing atmosphere seemed to clear-way for the usual. Chie’s cheeks cooled down. Her lips remained curved upwards in a grin for a while, but they eventually made their way into a frown, her eyebrows curving down in a sudden streak of sadness.

“Hey... Justin... You mind if I change the topic?”

Justin looked up, expecting to see Chie’s smiling face, only instead to be greeted by a heart-wrenching frown. His facial features soon shifted to match hers, his mouth curved downwards in sadness. He wasn’t sure what had caused such a sudden change in her emotion, but he didn’t like it one bit.

“Uh... sure...”

“I, uh... I ran into Takeshi last night.”

Justin bit at his bottom lip. Takeshi was supposed to meet with her and apologize for all that he had done to her, but given Chie’s reaction at the moment... Justin felt like he had actually made it worse by forcing him to do that. Maybe she just needed

some time to think without Takeshi's treachery constantly being jammed down her throat.

"You didn't have to do that you know." Chie suddenly spoke up turning her attention to Justin. Justin had to force his head to stay still. If he kept calm, she wouldn't know he had any involvement in Takeshi's sudden change of heart.

"Huh? What do yo--"

"It's alright, I know..." She chuckled slightly, though it sounded forced. She was happy Justin had been so kind as to try and amend what Takeshi had done, but it didn't help. Deep down she knew Takeshi had only apologized because Justin had forced him too. Justin frowned, his eyes filled with sorrow. He had thought he was doing the right thing, but looking at Chie now, it seemed he just fucked things up.

"Chie, I--"

"I appreciate the gesture, but... I could tell he wasn't really sorry, you know?"

"I thought him apologizing would cheer you up. You seemed so down whenever his name popped up." Chie smiled slightly at Justin as the words left his mouth. She still felt like shit because of Takeshi, but part of her was enthused by Justin's bold gesture. He had more or less threatened Takeshi into mending her broken heart. Takeshi did a shitty job at it, but it was the thought that counted; even if it was Justin's thought and not his.

"I've been thinking it over a lot lately, what happened with Takeshi. He was my friend since Kindergarten, long before I even met Yukiko. I was trying to think back to all the good times we had. I figured everyone makes mistakes, that this was just a fluke, you know? But, now that I think about it... He was always a jerk. He used to rag on me, call me names... He wasn't any different from the rest of the kids."

"Young love blinded you to the truth, huh?"

Justin smiled slightly in the corners of his mouth. Chie seemed surprised that Justin had figured out she used to have a crush on him, but then; he had thought she was in love with him since the first time he met Takeshi. She remembered that exchange clear as day. She remembered her heart skipping a beat as the words slipped from Justin's mouth; asking if she had a thing for Takeshi. She had originally taken it as his way of probing to find out if she was single, only to have her spirit crushed slightly when he had only taken that as a chance to make a few jokes at her expense. *Forget about Takeshi, she thought, what about you!? Why can't you stop being so blind for once in your life!?* In retrospect, she really wished she could have taken back that 'blind' portion of her thought.

While Chie had been sulking about in memory lane, Justin had been imagining what I must have been like for Chie at that age. He was a little off put that Chie's silence

had more or less confirmed she had a thing for Takeshi at one point, but pushed it out of his mind when he realized that was all in the past. In fact, he couldn't help but grin slightly at the picture of a young Chie trying to follow Takeshi around everywhere. In his mind, she looked almost exactly the same, only shorter, slightly chubbier, and missing a few teeth. And god, he thought it was cute when she got embarrassed now, he could only imagine how adorable it must have been when she was six. I mean, yeah, two different kinds of cute, but what the hell ever. His mini day-dream was soon interrupted by Chie snapping out of her stroll through her memories.

"I think that's what it all boiled down to. I had a crush on him, as silly as it sounds at that age. I think that's really the only reason I saw him as a friend in the first place; like I convinced myself he was actually a nice guy, even though he was just like the rest of them."

"Well, there must have been something nice he did. I mean, a crush can only last so long, and then what?"

"Well... There was that one time in 1st grade... A bunch of guys started to make fun of me on the playground when I asked to play cops and robbers with them. I guess they didn't think I could because I was girl. Or maybe they just didn't like hanging out with a girl; who knows."

"Ah yes, the infamous 'cooties.'" Justin smirked. Even when he was that age he thought cooties was a bunch of bullshit. I mean, just thinking at it from a logical standpoint, how is it that guys were afraid of a "disease" that only girls had? I mean, if you could get cooties from girls, shouldn't you also be afraid of guys having cooties? Then again, Justin didn't really have friends until he met Maya; so he had a lot more time to contemplate stuff like that.

"Well, I started to get upset. I mean, the other guys wouldn't let me join their game just because I was a girl? It just wasn't fair. That's when Takeshi stepped in. He said, 'Hey, let her join in. She won't last long anyway, so why not?' It was so degrading, yet..."

"You were happy he stood up to the others for you."

"Yeah... Well, anyways, there was this one kid that was really vocally against me joining; he said I was just going to get hurt, how I'd ruin all the fun. When the game actually started, he ended up pushing me into a wall."

Justin's eyebrow lowered. He was pissed, even if this did happen, like, nine years ago.

"Ugh... We had a kid like that when I was in elementary school too. Never once did he get in trouble though. His father paid for the construction of the gymnasium, or something, so he always got off the hook."

“Well, I was seven, and it really hurt, so I started to cry. All of the other boys seemed kind of ticked off at the other kid; it was clear as day he had done it on purpose. But, the only one who did anything was Takeshi. Takeshi shoved him, and then he shoved back. They both ended up getting detention for a week afterwards.”

Justin sighed slightly. Takeshi not being a spineless pussy? Him standing up for Chie when this kid had been a huge douche nozzle? This wasn't the Takeshi he knew, though he definitely wished it was. Maybe then things wouldn't have gone so sour between him and Chie.

“Actually, that was around the time that I started hitting back when people got in my face. Takeshi had told me that I should start standing up for myself...”

“And you assumed because Takeshi had whacked that kid, that was what he meant.”

“I guess...”

Chie paused for a moment, taking a look at the ramen bowl in front of her. They had gotten their food a good ten minutes ago or so, but neither really touched their food once they started up on the Takeshi topic. It just brought up too many heavy emotions for them to swallow food at the same time. What Justin had said had really struck her though. Did she kick people because of Takeshi? I mean, sure, it got her through elementary school and middle school, but... Was it really all Takeshi's doing that she had shaped up the way she had? She sighed. She supposed she should be thanking him in some capacity, but... She just couldn't. Not after what he had done. She gave the thought one last run over before looking back up to Justin, he's eyes on the ramen as he pushed the noodles from side to side with his chopsticks, never actually picking some up to eat.

“Hey, Justin... What was it like with you and Maya?”

Justin stopped swirling the noodles around instantly, though his gaze never lifted from the bowl. His eyebrows bunched down slightly. He looked kind of angry, though in actuality, he just wasn't sure what the best way of describing it was.

“Maya?”

“Y-you don't have to talk about it if you don't want, I was just a little curio-“

“No, no, it's fine. It's just... I'm not sure I could really tell you much other than what you already know.”

“Well, whatever you feel comfortable talking about.” Chie smiled. She had told him about her childhood friend, and now she was curious about his. It didn't matter what he said, she just wanted to know more; more about Maya, more about Justin's childhood, but most importantly, more about him.

“Well... You know already that she was poor, though you wouldn’t be able to tell just by looking at her. Sure, she always wore the same thing, and sure what she wore wasn’t exactly the pinnacle of class; but she was ‘well-kempt’ for lack of a better word. She was just as blunt as me, which was always a good thing. We were always taking jabs at each other, and usually, we laughed along as we became the subject of the other’s ridicule. In a way, she kind of reminds me of you, Chie.”

“Wha-- Me?”

“Yeah. Hell, she even used to knee me in the stomach whenever I got too out of line.”

Justin smirked. He hadn’t really realized it by now, but Maya was more or less a sarcastic, blunt, Chie. Of course, the comparison didn’t really settle well with Chie. Every word that came out of Justin’s mouth served to glorify Maya. From her looks, the way she dressed, her personality; the way he described her... She seemed like the perfect girl for him... And when Justin compared her to Chie? Was that what Chie was to him? Just Maya’s replacement. She shook her head slightly. She had to be out of her mind. Justin didn’t even remember Maya, let alone have any feelings towards her. What the hell was she getting so jealous for? She turned her attention back over to Justin, though much to her displeasure he had started frowning, his eyes focused on the center of his bowl of ramen again.

“All these dreams I keep having. They all have something to do with her, and yet I still don’t have a goddamned clue what’s going on. Screw all that stuff with the cigarettes and Kurt, I just want to know what happened to her. Why’d she run from home? Where is she now? Is she alright? Did she win the lottery and get the life she always deserved?”

Chie’s eyebrows dropped into concern, her eyes shimmering slightly as the watered. It was always in Justin’s personality to get concerned about people, but this... This was eating away at him. I mean, this had been his best friend for years, and suddenly she just vanishes without a trace. Even if what had happened wasn’t pretty, he needed answers. He needed closure. Justin sighed slightly before looking up at Chie.

“I had another one of those dreams a few days ago... When I hit my head on the railing.”

“H-Huh? Wh-What was it about!?” Chie panicked.

“Well, you remember how I told you Maya wanted to test out the Midnight Channel rumor? Well, it was just before midnight when she snuck in through my bedroom window. We sat there and talked, waiting for the clock to strike midnight... and when it did...”

“Don’t tell me it aired.”

"It did, but something was off. You know how the rumor was that you're supposed to see your soulmate when the TV flickered on? No one was there. Just an empty chair."

"Y-You mean like the one that was in the room the announcer was in?" Chie's eyes had dilated slightly.

Justin's head shot up immediately. He hadn't really noticed it before, but now that Chie mentioned it, it was the exact same chair that had been in the room they had found the first time they entered the television. There was no noose though, and it didn't seem like the posters or bed were there either. So then what the hell was the chair there for?

"Yeah. Though I don't know what it's supposed to mean." Justin sighed slightly. The chair was important and all, but something else seemed to take precedence in his mind. "Poor Maya. She was heartbroken when no one showed up on that screen."

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"Well, when no one showed up on the screen, the look in her eyes just... Soul crushing... And the way she got pissed off at me afterwards, how she said it was my fault her soulmate hadn't appeared on the screen, how she said that I was dragging her down because I didn't want to be with someone... I think Maya was secretly very lonely, and when no one pipped up on that screen... She took that as meaning she had no soulmate; that there would be no one out there for her."

Chie lowered her eyes in response. "That's so sad..." She didn't really know Maya all that well, but the way Justin had described it; it sounded like Maya just wanted someone to love her, and instead she was forced to run away from home, gun in hand. Why would such awful things happen to a fourteen year old girl?

"It all has to do with that channel, I just know it." Justin spoke up, slight anger in his voice. He was pissed off at whoever was doing this Midnight Channel shit. Whatever it was, it had completely fucked up Maya's life, and for that, he would never forgive the man responsible.

"How so?"

"She touched the screen..." Justin didn't need to finish that sentence. He already knew Chie would understand what he was getting at.

"Y-You mean like what we do?"

"Yeah. And it only reacted to her."

"D-Did you..."

“Go in? No. I forced Maya to pull her hand out. I didn’t know what was going on, and I assumed whatever it was could be dangerous.”

“What happened next?”

“After some shenanigans with Maya trying to hide from my father when he woke up from the commotion? Nothing. The dream just ended.”

Chie bit her bottom lip, looking about with lowered eyes as though trying to think. She only had so much information to work with, but she was determined to figure something out. Then something dawned upon her.

“Wait, didn’t Kurt say Maya said something about hiding some cigarettes in the other world?”

“Huh? Yeah, why?”

“Well, that means she had to go in at one point, right?”

“Alright...?”

“Sooooo, If she did, how would she have gotten out.”

Justin’s eyes widened immediately.

“Teddie!”

“Right! He had to have let her out at some point. He might know what went down.”

Justin immediately stood up, grabbing his hooded jacket from the seat he had occupied for the last half hour. Chie looked surprised, but that wasn’t going to stop him now. He had a lead that could very well have all the answers he needed, and goddammit, he wasn’t going to let it just slip away from him right now. He walked off, still putting his jacket up as Chie stood to follow, plopping some money to pay for their dishes on the way out. She’d have to remind herself to force Justin to pay for his half later.

“Ted! Get your ass over here!” Justin screamed out the second he stepped through the screen. He realized how aggressive it had sounded, but he didn’t care. The show was over. Chie soon followed behind Justin, tripping slightly on the plastic portion of the television screen on her way through. It happened from time to time for all of them. Hell, Yu did it almost every single time, and it wasn’t like he was clumsy or anything.

“Huh? Senpai? Where are the others?” Teddie spoke up hesitatingly as he saw the look in Justin’s eyes. They were hopeful, but also kind of angry. Justin couldn’t say

for certain, but there was a possibility that Justin had entered the television with her. Why then, had Teddie not spoke up when he first saw the-

Wait a second. The very first time Justin talked to Teddie, he responded with Justin's name. Now, he had passed it off as Yosuke and Yu filling him in, but... Justin hadn't actually talked to Teddie prior to that; he was suffering from the concussion the first time they met; which meant everything he said was under his breath; save one 'shut the fuck up' to Yosuke, and even then that came out as a bit rhaspy. That would be the only thing Teddie could hear him say. Which meant... Teddie shouldn't have been able to recognize Justin's voice. But he did, which meant... Teddie had talked to Justin before. He already knew who Justin was. Justin was sort of pissed that Teddie hadn't said anything to him, but he couldn't half blame him. When you know someone, you don't constantly point out the fact that you are aware of their existence.

Justin got down into a crouching position to make eye-contact with Teddie, who had being significantly shorter than Justin.

"We're not here for that Teddie. Tell me something Teddie. The first time you met Yu, and Yosuke, and Chie. That wasn't the first time you saw me, was it?"

"Huh? Well of course not!"

"Huh? W-Wait a second, does that mean--" Chie rushed out the words in a half-panic.

"I've been in the TV before. Maya must have let me in at some point."

"Maya? Oh, Oh! Is Maya here too!?"

Justin starred at Teddie for a moment. So he had met Maya at some point, though what really concerned Justin was that Teddie seemed to have completely neglected to bring this up the one time they were interrogating Justin's shadow for information regarding Maya. Actually... come to think of it, Teddie hadn't rounded the corner with the rest of the group when Justin had charged down the alleyway. He must have still been searching for the shadow when this all went down. Though that did beg the question why he hadn't brought it up when her name slipped again near the entrance of the television.

"I don't know, Teddie. I don't remember jumping in the television before that time I had fell in with Chie, I don't remember Maya, I don't remember anything. Clearly you've met us both before, what do you know Ted?"

"Well, I haven't seen her since a few months before you guys jumped inside for the first time."

Justin puffed a sigh of relief. A few months before they fell in wasn't exactly recent, but it hasn't been far off either. Whatever she was doing, she was alive and kicking. Though he had to wonder what she had been doing here.

"Do you know what she was doing that one time?"

"Huh? She said she had to come here for something... Ngh, what was that word? Bear-aphy?"

Justin was about to say something, though he had to force his mouth shut once the pun hit him. Goddamn that was clever.

"Was not pre-beared for that one."

"Can you guys stop with the bear puns already?" Chie interrupted, knowing full well that Justin and Teddie would get sidetracked if she didn't.

"Right, right sorry. Bear-aphy... You mean therapy?"

"Oh yeah, that was the word!" Teddie smiled as though he had been the one to crack the code. Justin sighed a little bit. Therapy... Sure, Maya probably had a lot of problems, but Justin had never really pictured her having to see a therapist; especially if it pertained to whatever effect this world had on her.

"She asked if you were around, so I said no."

"So... What exactly did she do in here?"

"Well, she looked like she was searching for something..." Teddie thought aloud, "But I don't think she found it; she just sort of left after a while."

"Think it might have to do with her shadow?" Justin questioned. I mean, it would make sense. If her shadow was suppressed emotions, and she was her for therapy, it seemed she would be here to deal with her shadow. Assuming she hadn't already, or if she was a special case like Yu.

"I don't know..."

"Alright, well that puts an end to that line of questioning..." Justin grimaced, "What about before that; what happened the first time she entered?"

"Huh? I remember you were with her, but other than that..."

"Was I with her after that?"

"A few times."

"And when did I stop coming through with her?"

"After about three times after the first."

"Alright..." Justin sighed slightly before digging through his pockets and pulling out a pack of cigarettes. "Have you ever seen her come in with these?"

"Well yeah! You two did it all the time!"

"I meant more than one. Like, a lot of these."

"Oooohh... Yeah, you brought some in once."

"What happened to them?"

"W-Well, when your shadow showed up--"

"Mine or hers."

"Hers. A-Anyway, I remember they got crushed when Maya denied her shadow. She seemed really upset about it when she came back the next day."

"She denied her shadow? So then she already defeated it?"

"N-No, we all sort of ran away..."

"You can do that?"

Teddie nodded his head, acknowledging it as true. Justin rubbed at his chin with his index finger for a little bit. That would explain what happened to the cigarettes, but now he was curious as to what had happened to Maya's shadow. If she had denied it like that, wouldn't the shadow technically be its own entity? It couldn't replace Maya quite yet, sure, but couldn't Justin and the rest of the gang have run into it by now? And why would Maya return knowing it could kill her at any time? It didn't make sense.

"Do you know what her shadow said?"

"I don't remember..." Teddies seemed sort of down as the words left his mouth.

"Well, I think that's about as much information we're going to get from the TV world angle; at least, for now." Justin wanted to continue that sentence with, 'now we just need to find out what happened with the mugging,' but chose not to knowing full well that Chie wasn't aware of Justin's crime. "Thanks Ted."

"Happy to help!"

"So what now?" Chie turned to Justin, a look of slight concern in her eye. Sure, they had a few answers questioned, and yes, they knew Maya had been alive and well now, but with those answers came bigger questions, questions he didn't think could be left hanging.

"Now we play the waiting game. We wait for another dream, then we act upon what we find out."

Chie sighed for a moment, first with unenthusiasm, though that soon turned unto relief.

"Well, at least we know Maya's still alright."

"That's really all that's important to me." Justin added, a relieved smile on his face. Chie smiled back at him, even if he couldn't see her from that angle. She felt relieved that Justin had found peace in the information he had gathered of Teddie; though that still begged the question of what had went down. And he still wanted to know if Maya was living like a king, just the way she always should have. And where the hell was her shadow? Unless she had defeated it already, of course.

"Alright Teddie, we're heading back out... Do me a favor."

"Yes senpai?"

"If for some odd-reason Maya comes back; tell her I said long time no see."